

VZCZCXRO2097

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DE RUEHSI #0819 1191425
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 291425Z APR 09
FM AMEMBASSY TBILISI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 1476
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS TBILISI 000819

DEPT FOR EUR/CARC, EEB

SENSITIVE

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PHUM](#) [KPAO](#) [GG](#)

SUBJECT: The Roma in Georgia

REF: A) STATE 30437, B) 08 Tbilisi 0589

¶1. (SBU) Summary: In response to reftel marking International Roma Day, the Embassy posted the Secretary's message on its website and took the opportunity to meet with the Executive Director of the Human Rights Center in Georgia and a representative of the Civil Registry of the Ministry of Justice to follow-up on last year's report on the situation of the Roma in Georgia (Ref B). In sum, the Roma remain isolated from the rest of Georgian society and the public services available to registered residents including education and health services.

¶2. (SBU) The OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities reports approximately 2,250 Roma reside in Georgia, about 0.05 percent of the total Georgian population (from "Recent Migration of Roma in Europe, December 10, 2008"). Ucha Nanuashvili, Executive Director of the Human Rights Center in Georgia, agrees with the figure. The majority of Georgian Roma live in two locations in Tbilisi: Lotkin Hill and Navtlugi Bazar in the Samgori district. Lotkin Hill residents came to Georgia between 1920-1930 and identify themselves as Moldovans, perhaps because that is how they were registered by the Soviets. A large portion of the Roma living in the Navtlugi neighborhood may be IDPs from Abkhazia, but lack documentation to verify this. Navtlugi is also home to a group of 100-200 Muslim Roma who came to Georgia in the 1980's as refugees from Nagorno-Karabakh.

Unwillingness to Register Yields Hurdles

¶3. (SBU) Nanuashvili of the Human Rights Center in Georgia pointed out that there is little official support for the Roma in Georgia as they are not registered with the government and, without documentation, they cannot access health care and education. His office has documented this problem for the Ministry of Justice and the Civil Registry but, in a country currently supporting 54,000 internally displaced people from the 2008 conflict (UNHRC Briefing Notes 12/09/08), the small Roma population falls further down on the list of immediate government priorities.

¶4. (SBU) According to Nanuashvili, in Georgia the main occupations of the Roma are selling and reselling small items at markets, begging and petty crime. Tbilisi Roma society is closed and is subordinated to a community leader, whose identity is usually kept secret. Most Roma children do not go to school and start earning money for their families at an early age. Directly related to the lack of education and relevant vocational skills, the main problem for the Roma population in Georgia is its lack of official documentation. Most Roma do not have documentation including birth certificates, as children are usually not born at hospitals. Nanuashvili believed that the Roma community does not aspire to get documents. The lack of proper documents also makes social services including, primarily health care, education, and vulnerability allowances unavailable to the Roma community.

Ministry of Justice Seeks to Document

15. (SBU) A Representative of the Civil Registry of the Ministry of Justice told poloff that the Ministry is working to register undocumented residents from a variety of ethnic minorities populations of entire mountain villages that have never previously been documented. Registering the Roma presents unique challenges due to their unique language, frequent geographic movement - some more nomadic than stable, and quality of information that can be used to verify a person's place and year of birth. Giorgi Vashadze, Head of the Civil Registry explained that the registration of the Roma requires deep and sensitive discussion on a case by case basis until some kind of determination can be made for registration of each individual. It is possible but requires interest on the part of the Roma as well. Until they are registered they do not bureaucratically exist "- they are not even stateless." He encouraged the Embassy to support a local NGO's efforts with UNHCR to register isolated populations in Georgia as a way of increasing political will on both sides.

16. (SBU) For the Roma, the vicious cycle of isolation is hard to break, but can still be overcome with sufficient will on the part of the civil society, the government and the Roma themselves. Post has encouraged grant proposals for the Julia Taft Grant, which addresses refugees, vulnerable populations and returns, as welcome. We will work to identify NGOs which could utilize this important resource.

TEFFT